



The 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Islamic Architectural Heritage (ISLAH) 2019  
Sultan Mehmet Fatih Vakif University, Istanbul, Turkey, 26-28<sup>th</sup> August 2019

# Symbolism and Meaning in Old Masjid Architecture of Malay Archipelago: A Case Study of Masjid in Kerinci, Jambi, Indonesia

Presented by  
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This paper is made possible with the FRGS grant by the Government of Malaysia titled: Analysing Fundamental Values of Islam in the Planning and Design of Historic Nusantara Vernacular Masjid Architecture for Regional Sustainable Malay Islamic Architecture.

Symbolism in masjid architecture

# Abstract

Masjid (mosque) plays a significant role in the life of a Muslim. Throughout history, the old masjids of the old cities and towns reflect the acculturation of Islamic faith with the local culture that embraced the religion. This paper demonstrates through experiential learning how acculturation of Islamic faith and culture of the people in the Malay Archipelago gives symbolic meanings to the masjid architecture and enhances the spatial as well as the spiritual experience of the people. The old masjid in the Kerinci region of Sumatra, Indonesia, was selected as the case studies. In the process of the research, important aspects of the religion and culture were encoded, presented and communicated in the form of architectural features of the masjid, giving meanings and heightened the spiritual experience of the users. The symbolic meanings made through architectural manifestation, in physical form, both structural and non-structural components of the masjid, enriches and gives a distinctive and unique character to the masjid architecture. The symbolic meanings in the old masjid architecture of Kerinci are simplified abstractions to manifest the worldview of the local people based on the spirit of Islam. The paper concluded that incorporating symbolism that does not impede Islamic teachings or the shariah in designing a masjid can enhance and even exalted the religious spirit of users while providing distinct character to the masjid. Old masjids are the best example of how architecture can play a significant role is not only as a focal congregational space for the daily worshippers but can also enhance their spiritual experiences. In the same process, the physical masjid naturally creates an identity to the place -charmingly.

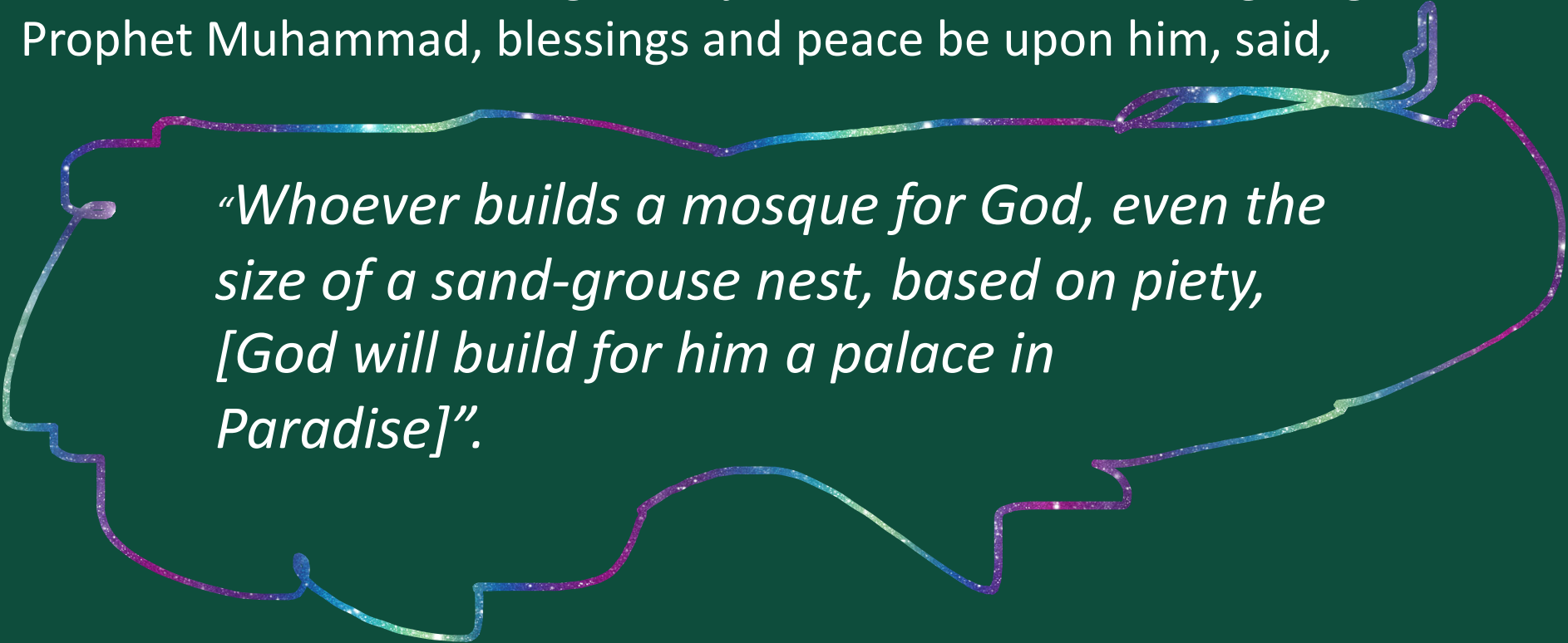


# The Storyline

- Introduction
- Islam in Nusantara
- Inculcation of local culture in masjid architecture in the Malay Archipelago
- Islam in Kerinci, Jambi, INDONESIA
- Why the study -Symbolic Meanings in the Masjid Architecture of Kerinci
- Methodology, Scope and limitation
- Case Studies
- Conclusion

# INTRODUCTION

- The patronage of masjid is a charitable act.
- The sincere act of building a masjid is seen as a rewarding religious act.
- Prophet Muhammad, blessings and peace be upon him, said,



*“Whoever builds a mosque for God, even the size of a sand-grouse nest, based on piety, [God will build for him a palace in Paradise]”.*

# INTRODUCTION

- ...thus Masjid plays a major role in the life of a Muslim, a reflection of the obedience to the Almighty Creator and a symbol of Muslim architecture.
- Masjid architecture is one of the best built examples of the architecture in terms of artistic imagery and structural expression, and physical stability
- Islam did not have rules on the construction of a masjid but open to interpretation and needs of a specific culture as long as the culture is coterminous with its teachings.
- Throughout history, the old masjid were reflection of acculturation of Islamic faith and the local culture that embraced the religion which resulted in distinctive masjid architecture portrayed by its motifs, ornamentation and unique architectural features, specific to the cultural context of the masjids.

# INTRODUCTION

- The difference in the characteristics of masjid architecture came from the interpretation of Islamic faith and the influence of culture of the people, modified by environmental factors.
- The meaning in the architecture of the masjid is an expression of human spatial needs to be connected to the Creator within a cultural milieu, translated into symbolic physical representation, influenced by both their worldview and religious belief.

*“Surely We have created everything according to a measure” Quran 54:49.*

- Traditional masjid were built based on the basis of submission and obedience to the Almighty Creator through the effort and cooperation of the community.

# ISLAM IN NUSANTARA-MALAY ARCHIPELAGO

- Islam may have set foot and expanded as a strong social system in the Malay Archipelago as early as the 11th century. However, given the paucity of contemporaneous historical records, no convincing explanation has been provided to date of the precise mechanisms through which Islam penetrated Nusantara
- According to Staquf (2015), Islam spread throughout Nusantara through a “diffusive” and “adaptive” process that, for the most part, eschewed military conquest. Like Hinduism and Buddhism before it, Islam “dissolved” and was gradually absorbed into the prevailing local civilization of Nusantara.



# ISLAM IN NUSANTARA-MALAY ARCHIPELAGO

- A.H. Johns (1981) in Muhammad Ali ( 2013) states that Islamization in Southeast Asia, was an irregular pattern of pulses over centuries. The Islamic scholars (ulama) of various origins and the converted rulers played their roles in the administration of the Islamic law concerning religious duties, the legal formulation of trade contracts, and in the expansion of Islam into the wider realms.
- The Malay world, as a result of multi-interpretability of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad's tradition and complex nature of human history, Islam has become complex, diverse, and dynamic. Muhammad Ali reiterated that Islam continues to be generally moderate if seen from accommodative and adaptive attitudes towards various local, ethnic, national, and global cultures.



# ISLAM IN NUSANTARA- MALAY ARCHIPELAGO

- **Masjid architecture** of the past in the Malay Archipelago is the best example of how meanings based on Islamic teachings and local culture were imbued into masjid architecture

# Inculcation of local culture in masjid architecture in the Malay Archipelago

- There is a relation between the masjid architecture of Masjid Lima Kaum, West Sumatra with the philosophy of the Minang society and the teaching of Islam as seen in how the number of columns, roof tiers, entrance, steps leading to the muezzin and other architectural elements of the masjid gives meaning and character to the Masjid Lima Kaum (Zainuddin, 2015).





# Masjid Lima Kaum, West Sumatra

The philosophy of the *Minang* society and the teaching of Islam

- 5 roof tiers – Principle of Islam
- The number of columns (121) – the number of *ninik-mamak* (elders who hold the customs of Minangkabau)
- 28 windows – the different groups (*suku*) in the Minangkabau society
- Two entrances – Reflect *Laran Nan Duo*
- 100 steps leading to the *muezzin* - the names of Allah

Symbolism in masjid architecture



# NUSANTARA-SOUTH EAST ASIA-THE LOCATION

kerinchi sumatera



## Mount Kerinci

Gunung Kerinci  
South Lubuk Gadang  
Sangir  
South Solok Regency, West Sumatra  
Indonesia

4.2 ★★★★★ (430)

Mountain peak



Directions



Save



Nearby



Send to your  
phone

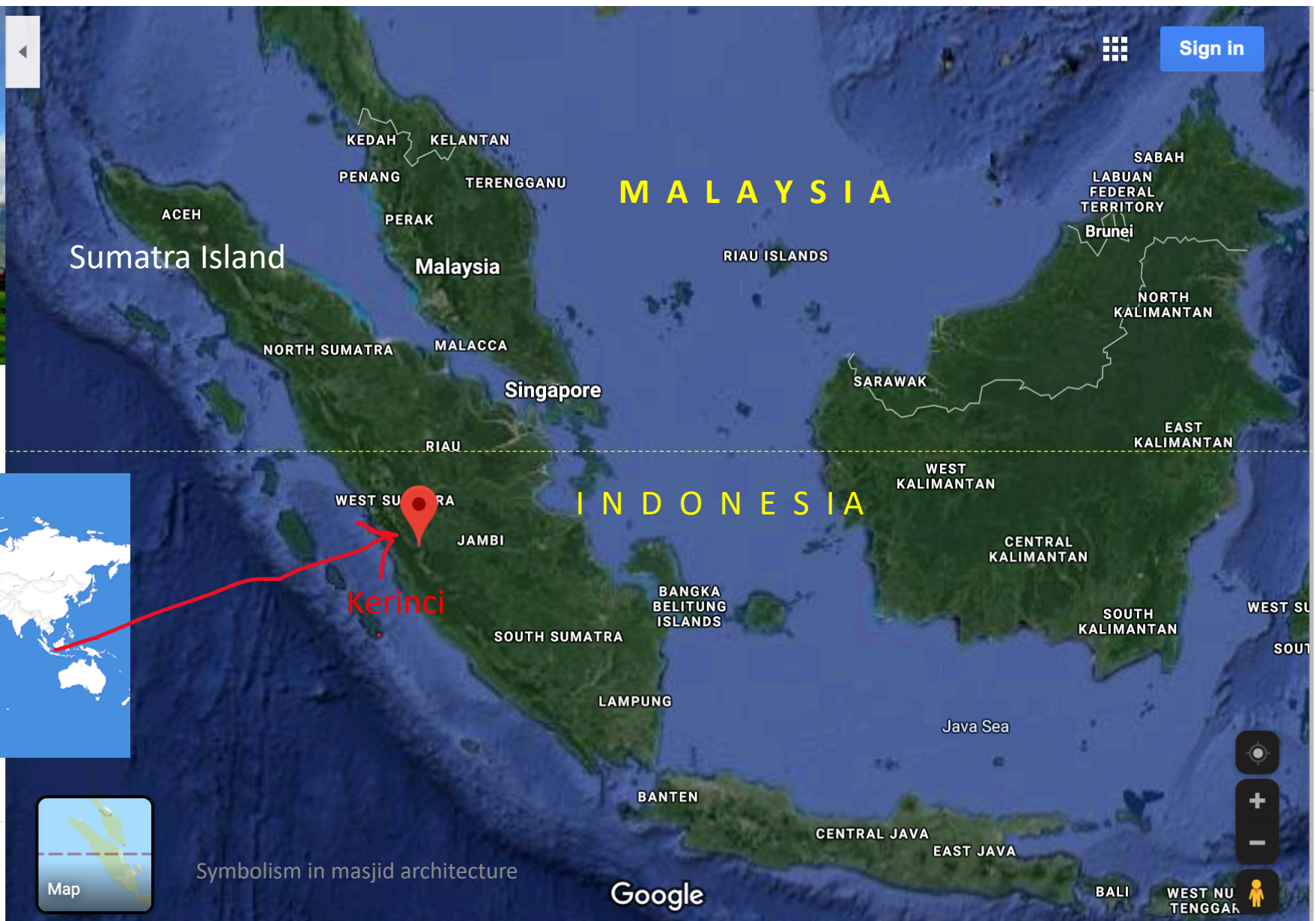
Share



South Lubuk Gadang, Sangir, South Solok Regency,  
West Sumatra, Indonesia



Lubuk Gadang Sol. Sangir, Kabupaten Solok Selatan



# ISLAM IN KERINCI, JAMBI, INDONESIA

- The rise of Islam in the Malay Archipelago during the 16th century was accompanied by the formation of a separate Muslim state of Jambi.
- The region was then incorporated into the Republic of Indonesia in 1950 as part of the province of Central Sumatra after being recognized and ruled by Dutch colonial, and the Japanese during World War II.
- Central Sumatra was divided into the provinces of West Sumatra, Riau, and Jambi in 1957 (Budi Vrihaspati, 2014). Almost one-third of Jambi is covered by the Barisan Hill Range making some of the areas of the province not easily inaccessible.



PROVINCE OF JAMBI



# ISLAM IN KERINCI, JAMBI, INDONESIA

- Kerinci is one of the districts located within the mountainous area Jambi.
- Kerinci is less influenced by external factors due to its isolated location on the mountain alongside Barisan Hill range and was one of the last areas of Indonesia to be colonised by the Dutch.
- Islam was introduced to Kerinci through Aceh in the 13th century (Budi Vrihaspati, 2014, p.13) and West Sumatra, by the Minangkabau people who migrated and made Kerinci their homes.
- The community of Kerinci follows the matrilineal system, an influence of the Minangkabau and *Adat Papatih*.

Symbolism in masjid architecture



KERINCI





## ISLAM IN KERINCI, JAMBI, INDONESIA

- The high position of Islam among the Kerinci people is reflected in a custom which is divided into four custom: true custom or custom according to the teaching of Islam based on Qu'ran), customs passed from generation to generation), customs that are adhered to, based on the agreement of the society and customs specific to a person. Of the four, custom according to Islam is considered as the most important (Zakarya, 1984).
- The strength of custom is associated with the practice of Islam as a way of life, reflected in the masjid being a centre of religious activities.
- The architecture of the masjid exhibit the characteristics of Nusantara masjid such as tiered pyramidal roof and square plan ***but its ornamentations and architectural features are uniquely localised***



## WHY THE STUDY ?

- There is very minimal study and recorded information on the masjid.
- This paper seeks to examine **the symbolic meanings in the masjid architecture of Kerinci**

# METHODOLOGY, SCOPE & LIMITATIONS

- Descriptive analysis of selected masjid
- The paper was based on a study of in Kerinci by Heritage Studies 2017 International Islamic University Malaysiafour masjid focusing on two case studies :
  - *Masjid Pondok Tinggi, Sungai Penuh and*
  - *Masjid Kiramah, Koto Tuo, in Kerinci, Jambi, Sumatra, Indonesia.*
- Two weeks fieldwork - measured drawing, interview, observation and review of the literature.
- As recorded information is limited, the study relies on anonymous but established references and information shared and ascertained by the masjid committee members, academicians, local architects, craftsman and artisans.

# THE CASE STUDIES

## SYMBOLISM AND MEANINGS IN MASJID IN KERINCI



Masjid Pondok Tinggi, Sungai Penuh



Masjid Kiramah, Koto Tuo

Symbolism in masjid architecture

# Masjid Symbolism and Meanings in the Architecture of Kerinci

- The architectural features of Masjid Pondok Tinggi and Masjid Kiramah symbolically, represent the people's faith and culture which emphasised on the strong relationship between the people and their environment
- It is consistent with the idea of the Kerinci custom which emphasises on the importance of Islam as their way of lives and their respect to nature.
- The masjid distinctive ornaments and decorative elements, reflect the simple and humble lifestyle of the people of Kerinci.
- **Symbolism and meanings were imbued in the architecture of the masjid in different ways in both the structural and non-structural components.**

# MASJID IN KERINCI, JAMBI, INDONESIA

- The basic form of the masjid in Kerinci were based on the model of **Masjid Demak**.
- The old masjid architecture of Kerinci is distinctive and exceptional in its own way:
  - The rough extended rafters along the four sides of the roof
  - Suspended muezzin platform. Despite its distinctive characteristics



Symbolism in masjid architecture



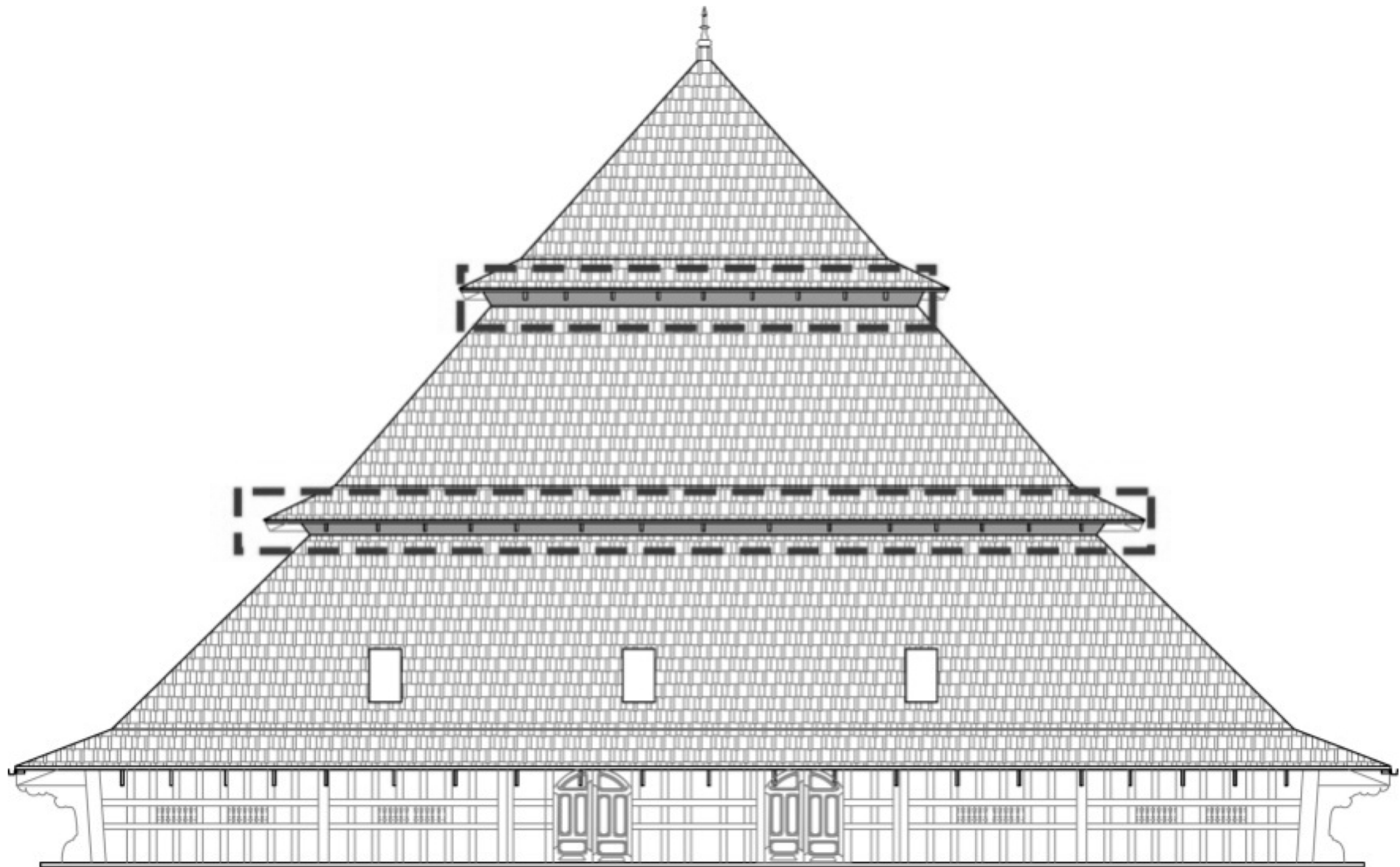
# Architecture of masjid : Kerinci

- Masjid Pondok Tinggi and Masjid Kiramah are ***square in plan and are slightly raised from the ground.***
- Masjid Pondok Tinggi is 30m x 30m in dimension consisting a prayer hall. It was constructed in 1874 and completed in 1902. A *mihrab* about 3m x 3m in dimension was added in 1925.
- Masjid Kiramah is 27m x 27m in dimension, constructed in 1780 and completed in 1785 with an addition of a minaret in 1920.
- ***The planning and construction of the masjid were both led by the leader and heads of the clans were based on a mutual cooperation of the whole community***



# Distinctive features which give character to the masjid:

- massive pyramidal tiered roof
- extended rafters located throughout the perimeter and four corners of the masjid
- Suspended platform for muezzin
- Different types of floral motif carvings/ decorations at its columns, beams, walls and the platform for the *muezzin*.
- Earthquake resistance inter-connected structural components and flexible joinery systems
- Colourful ornamentations
- No windows with minimal openings
- Two entrance doors



Masjid Pondok Tinggi

Symbolism in masjid architecture

# The Roof

- The roof of both masjid are made up of a three-tiered pyramidal roof with a *mustaka*, a cylindrical shaped carved stone, positioned on the peak of the roof to stabilize the structure of the masjid.
- The tiered roof symbolises the three different levels of administrations in the Kerinci society; *Sko Teganai*, *Sko Ninik Mamak* and *Sko Depati* consistent with the Law of the Custom of Kerinci (*Undang-undang Adat*).
- The four corners of the pyramidal roof symbolise the four divisions in a state (*Luhah*) consisted of the four clans namely *Rio Mendaro*, *Rio Sengaro*, *Rio Pati* and *Rio Temenggung*. The *Ninik Mamak* or the head of the custom comprises of the heads of clans, is responsible for leading the clans with regards to the custom based on the teaching of Islam (*Syara'*).
- The pyramidal hip roof signifies there is one head of the custom, *Depati Payung Nan Sekaki*, who heads matters about Islamic teachings leading to the Oneness of All Creator, the one Allah Almighty.





Masjid Keramat, Kota Tuo

Symbolism in masjid architecture





Symbolism in masjid architecture

Masjid Pondok  
Tinggi



# THE COLUMNS

## Masjid Pondok Tinggi

- The thirty-six (36) octagonal shaped columns in Masjid Pondok are divided into three (3) types depending on its height measured in *depa* (an old measurement commonly used in the Malay Archipelago).
- The first type, the nine *depa* columns (*Tian Panjang Sambilea*) are located in the most inner position, followed by the five *depa* columns (*Tian Panjang Limao*) and lastly the two *depa* columns (*Tian Panjang Due*) located at the perimeter of the masjids.

# THE COLUMNS

## Masjid Pondok Tinggi

- The four (4) *Tian Panjang Sambilea* located in the middle of the masjid, represents the four corners of *Kaabah*, and symbolises the four (4) states in the District of Kerinci.
- The octagonal columns represent the eight (8) prohibited acts in the custom of Kerinci which are consistent with Islam teachings:
  - i) The acts are the act of hurting, agonizing or causing harm to others,
  - ii) adultery,
  - iii) destroying properties of others,
  - iv) hurting or injuring others,
  - v) stealing,
  - vi) taking the properties of others,
  - vii) fighting, and
  - viii) seducing a wife of another man.



The interior of Masjid Pondok Tinggi

Symbolism in masjid architecture





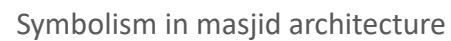
The column surrounded the four main columns in Masjid Pondok Tinggi

Symbolism in masjid architecture



One of the 36 perimeter columns in Masjid Pondok Tinggi

Source: IIUM Heritage Studies 2017



# COLUMNS

## Masjid Kiramah

- Masjid Kiramah Koto Tuo is made up of twenty (25) octagonal columns; the middle column, the four (4) *sokoguru* and twenty (20) perimeter columns.
- The number of column represents twenty five (25) main prophets of Islam
- The middle column symbolises Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. looking over his *ummah* or followers (Sumarlin, 2016)
- The four (4) columns (represent the four companions of the prophet p.b.u.h, bettwe known as the Khulafa' Ar-Rasyidin (Abu Bakar as-Siddiq, Umar al-Khattab, Usman al-Affan and Ali Abi Talib)
- The twenty (20) perimeter columns represent twenty (20) attributes of Allah which cannot be associated with Him.





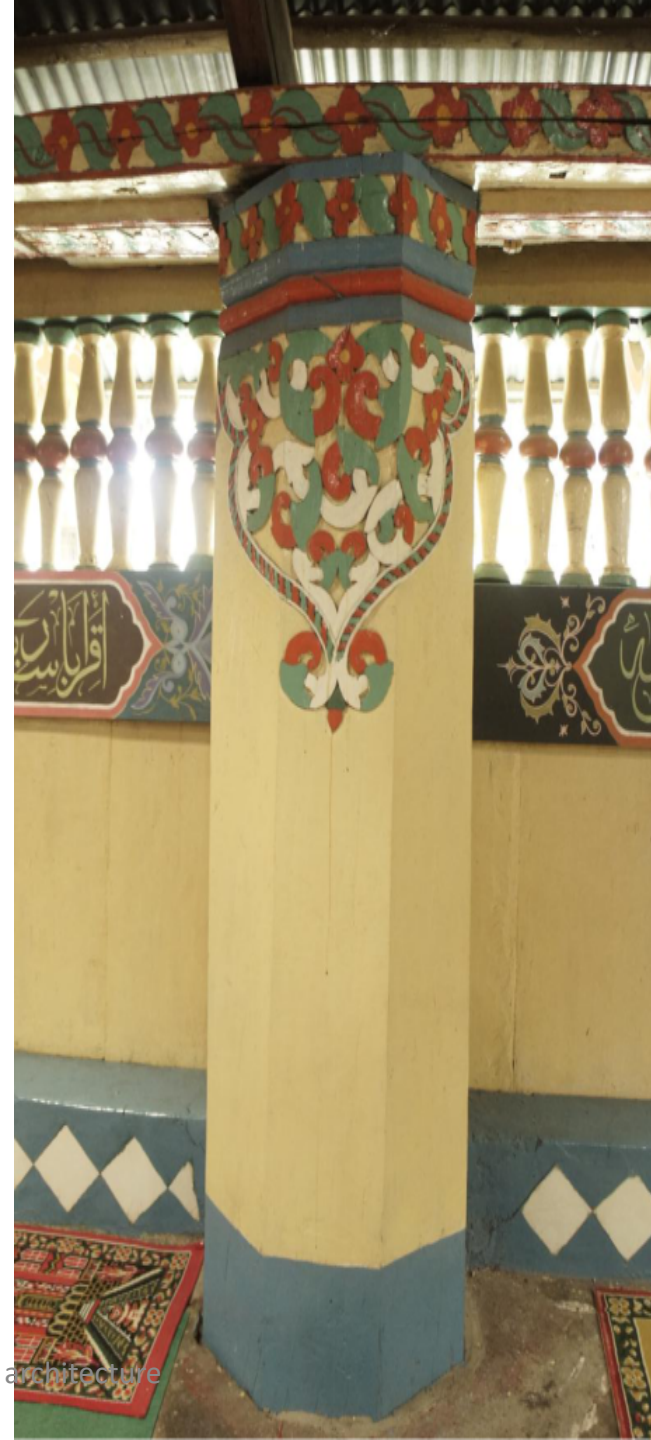
The interior of Masjid Kiramah showing the main column and other columns





One of the four  
columns  
surrounding the  
main column

Symbolism in masjid architecture



Perimeter column of  
Masjid Kiramah



# The Muezzin platform

- The place for the muezzin to call for prayers is one of the most interesting features inside the two masjid and other old masjid of Kerinci.

# Muezzin Platform: Masjid Pondok Tinggi

- The platform in Masjid Pondok Tinggi is suspended above ground at the centre of the east beam connecting two of the main columns of *Tian Panjan Sambilea*.
- The platform in Masjid Pondok Tinggi can be accessed through two sets of steep stairs and a bridge.
- The first set of stairs consisted of 17 steps, symbolizing the 17 *rakaats* (the act of a prayer according to a certain positions and sequence) in the daily prayers.
- The narrow bridge represents the path that one has to go through on the Day of Judgement (*Titian Siratul Mustaqim*) and the second set of stairs consisting of five (5) steps signify the number of daily prayers.



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- The narrow bridge represents the path that one has to go through on the Day of Judgement (*Titian Siratul Mustaqim*)
- the second set of stairs consisting of five (5) steps signify the number of daily prayers.

The Muezzin platform in Masjid Pondok Tinggi

Synagogue in masjid architecture





According to Iskandar (1984) in *Tambo Sakti Alam Kerinci* 2, the main decoration inside the masjid was based on floral motif, following the Islamic law, without any animal figures motive.

Carving of six lotus flowers under the muezzin platform that represents six pillars of Islam



The *mimbar* has many meanings behind its design.

For example, the five pillars represent the five (5) faiths of Islam, and two pillars located at the arched entrance of the *mimbar* represents the declaration of faith

A photograph of the interior of Masjid Kiramah, focusing on the Muezzin platform. The platform is a tall, ornate wooden structure with intricate carvings and colorful decorations. It is supported by a thick, decorated pillar. The ceiling is high and features a complex wooden truss system with a thatched roof. The lighting is warm, highlighting the architectural details.

The Muezzin platform  
in Masjid Kiramah

Symbolism in masjid architecture

- The stairs leading to the *muezzin* platform in Masjid Kiramah Koto Tuo consist of 17 sets of treads and risers, symbolizing the number of *rakaats* in daily prayers
- The bridge linking the stairs and the platform are both representing *Titian Siratul Mustaqim*

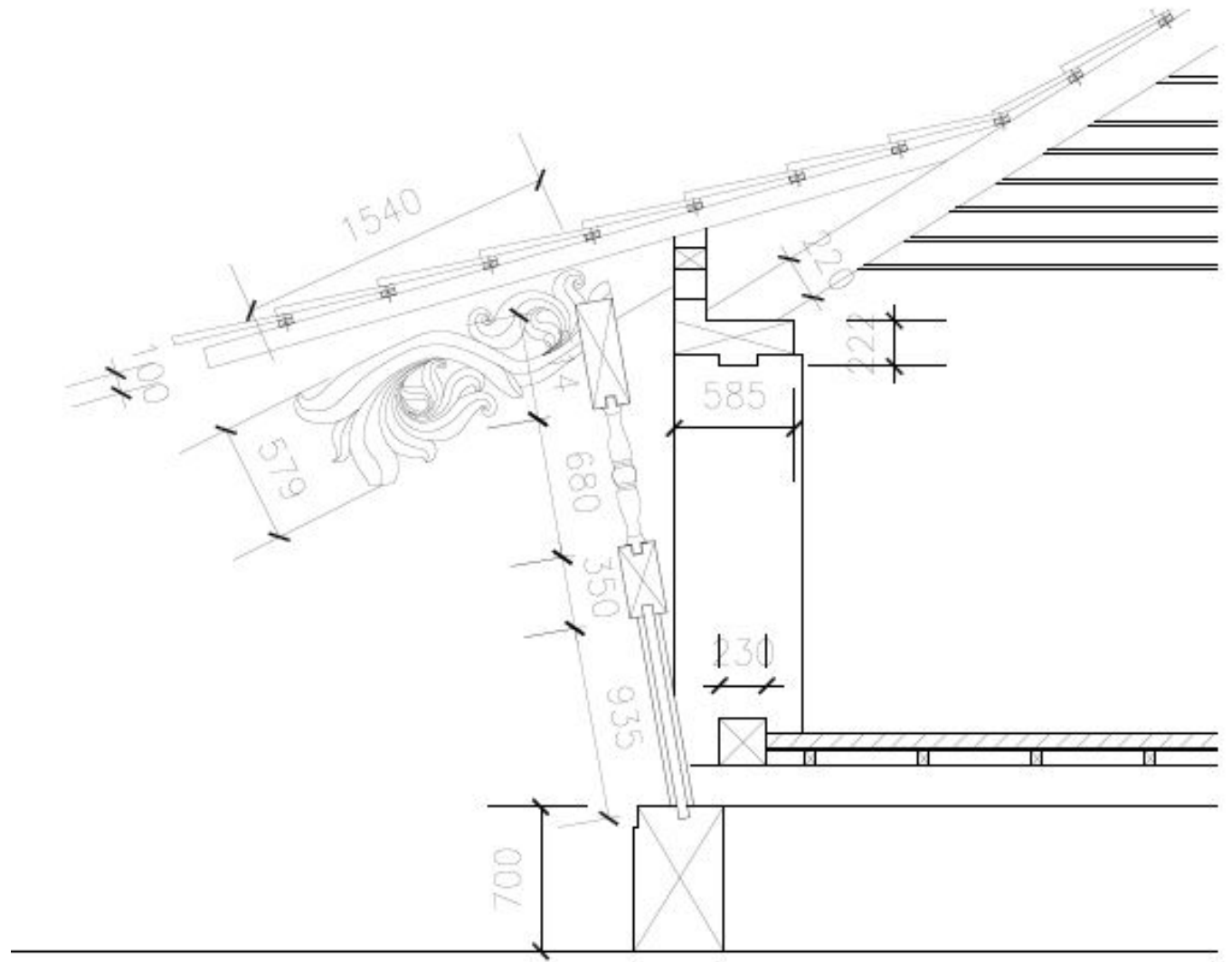




The Muezzin platform in Masjid Kiramah made of decoration and carvings of flora and fauna symbolizes the garden in heaven

# Wall Section of Masjid Kiramah

Source: IIUM Heritage Studies 2017



A black and white photograph showing a close-up, low-angle view of the eaves of a traditional Indonesian mosque. The focus is on the ornate wooden rafters, which are intricately carved with floral and geometric patterns. The rafters are arranged in a series of overlapping, curved lines that create a rhythmic, scalloped effect along the roof's edge. The background is blurred, showing more of the roof structure and the sky.

## EXTENDED RAFTERS AROUND THE PERIMETER OF THE ROOF

The carvings at the extended rafters are most notable feature of masjid in Kerinci and gives a very strong impression from outside. The carved rafters add character to the otherwise simple form of the masjid. The rafters consisted of colourful carvings of floral motifs. Each of the carved rafters looks similar from a distance, but each are different, carved by and represented the different families living around the masjids. The carved rafters embodies the close bonding and relationship of the community who, together built the masjids. The 114 rafters in Masjid Keramat Koto Tuo represent the number of verses in the Qur'an.

Ornamentism in masjid architecture





# THE DETAILS AT EDGES

Masjid Kiramah

The importance of nature in the culture of Kerinci seen in abstract representation of nature into symbolic meanings



Openings created by the balustrades on the wall panels provide minimal and diffused lighting and ventilation into the prayer hall

Information gathered during fieldwork indicated that the lack of window in the old masjid in Kerinci was due to the pre-Islamic idea that a place of worship with limited lighting allows concentration during the act of worshipping.

Symbolism in masjid architecture



The  
Mangosteen,  
Hanging joint  
Masjid  
Kiramah



The Wall  
strutting  
Masjid  
Pondok Tinggi

Symbolism in masjid architecture

## DECORATION IN KERINCI CULTURE

The decorations in Kerinci are based on representation of the natural elements of flora and fauna, influenced by the acculturation of Indonesian culture and past religious belief.

represents prosperity and wealth of the people.

the main decoration inside the masjid was based on floral motif, following the Islamic law, without any animal figures motive (Iskandar, 1984 S-shaped pattern is genuine ornament of Kerinci, derived from the winged bean and fern leaf, called '*Keluk Paku Kacang Belimbing*' or '*Turiq*' motif (*auraka*-leaves) in the local language, seen on most parts of the masjid; wall, column, beam and door



## THE MIMBAR MASJID KIRAMAH



Symbolism in masjid architecture



There are two doors to the prayer hall located on the east wall of the both masjid.

- The door at the right and left are separate entrances for male and female
- The two leaf entrance doors represent the declaration of Islamic faith (*Kalimah Dua Syahadah*). One is reminded of his/ her declaration of faith when entering the prayer hall to perform a prayer or other acts of worship.

## THE DOOR

Masjid Kiramah

Symbolism in masjid architecture



# CONCLUSION

- Acculturation of Islamic faith and culture of the people in the Malay Archipelago gives symbolic meanings to the masjid architecture
- The symbolic meanings derived from faith and culture enriches and gives a distinctive and unique character to the masjid architecture
- Important aspects of Islam and culture were encoded, presented and communicated in the form of architectural features of the masjid, giving meanings and heightened the spiritual experience of the users
- The symbols of Islamic faith manifested through the physical form, both structural and non-structural

# CONCLUSION

- Symbolic meanings in traditional masjid architecture are ***simplified abstractions manifesting the worldview of the people***
- Incorporating symbolism in designing a masjid can ***enhance and exalted the religious spirit of users*** and in the process gives meanings and character to the masjid.
- Old masjids are the best example of how architecture can play a major role not only in providing a physical shell for the users but ***enhance their spatial and spiritual experiences*** and in the process ***creates an identify for a place***





# MASJID KIRAMAH

PULAU TENGAH, KERINCI, INDONESIA  
THE HIDDEN GEM

AAR 3302 HERITAGE STUDIES  
DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE  
KULLIYAH OF ARCHITECTURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN

Symbolism in Masjid architecture



# MASJID PONDOK TINGGI

KOTA SUNGAI PENUH, KERINCI, INDONESIA  
THE PINNACLE OF FAITH

AAR 3302 HERITAGE STUDIES  
DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE  
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teşekkür ederim  
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your attention

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